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Making-One With God: At-one-ment in the Theology of William Porcher DuBose

ROBERT B. SLOCUM

[This article concludes a series on the theology of William Porcher DuBose which was begun in the December 1990 issue of the *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* and continued in the June 1991 issue. DuBose (1836-1918) was the second dean of the School of Theology at Sewanee (1894-1908) and a leading Episcopal theologian. This article discusses the convergence of his theological themes in atonement.]

Making-one and being at-one with God is in the opinion of William Porcher DuBose the end and purpose of life, especially our life in the community of the Church. Atonement with God is the reason for all our sharing and seeking, all our efforts to discern the truth, get along, and find our way. Distortion of life, distortion of understanding, and distortion of the Church all occur when we lose sight of atonement as the end and purpose of all we do and say. Our completion is in the unity of atonement. These themes are clearly expressed in DuBose's published writings, especially his essays collected by W. Norman Pittenger in *Unity in the Faith*.¹

The atonement has often been discussed as a theological issue. Unfortunately, the active role of humanity in the process of atonement has often been diminished by identifying Jesus as legal substitute or mechanical satisfaction for humanity's sin. DuBose notes the liabilities of such views in the essay "Resurrection":

The danger of the terms "vicarious," "substitution," etc.—is that they have led and do lead into the error that redemption, salvation, righteousness, and all that Christianity promises and gives—is expressed in the

¹William Porcher DuBose, *Unity in the Faith*, W. Norman Pittenger, ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1957).

objective and judicial act and status of acquittal from guilt and condemnation. To separate too widely the "done for us" or the "done instead of our doing" from the "done with and in and through and by us" and so the "*our* doing too"—has been the source of no little weakness and failure in our current Christianity.²

DuBose emphasizes that atonement is no substitute for humanity's participation in the sanctifying process. Our participation is essential. DuBose notes in the essay "Evangelical and Catholic" that Jesus's "task was to be, and is, humanity's task: 'Where I am, *there* shall my disciple be.' He did not die instead of us, but *for* us, that we might die: His death is, and must be, our death in precisely the sense and extent that His risen life is our life."³

Jesus is the author and pioneer of our salvation. He shows us the way we must follow to be at-one with God. Jesus does not follow this way *instead of* us; he opens the way *for* us. But Jesus does not choose *for* us. Nothing takes the place of our free choice in this process of making-one with God. DuBose explains in the essay "Christ the Solution of Human Life" that "God has endowed us, purposed us, called or invited us to share His own perfection and blessedness. In Christ He has shown us how, has promised us that we shall, and has given us demonstration not only of His will and purpose but of His power,—if we will."⁴ In Christ the way to salvation is open to us, if only "we will." There is no legal or mechanical substitute for our will in cooperation with God's atoning purpose.

Atonement and the Life of the Church

Taken as a whole, DuBose's approach to theology is "liberal" and "catholic." Simultaneously he upholds the tradition while seeking to discover in it new forms and ways of understanding. DuBose is true to both aspects of his "liberal catholic" theology without denying either. In *High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, DuBose explains that "each time must have its own living interpretation, since the interpretation cannot but be, in half measure at least, relative to the time. If the divine part in it is fixed, the human is progressive and changing just insofar as it is living."⁵

DuBose believes that the Church and her members should live in a way that is open to the continuity and discovery of truth. This belief is at the heart of his liberal and catholic approach to theology, and his call for an open forum in the

²"Resurrection," *Unity in the Faith*, 96.

³"Evangelical and Catholic," *Unity in the Faith*, 200.

⁴"Christ the Solution of Human Life," *Unity in the Faith*, 136.

⁵William Porcher DuBose, *High Priesthood and Sacrifice: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 2.

Church to discover truth. DuBose urges the Church to be comprehensive, inclusive of many viewpoints, and open to hearing the truth from whatever source. He is not afraid for the truth in times of disagreement or controversy because "truth, if allowed to do so, always can and always will prove itself."⁶

Atonement is the purpose and end of all these approaches. We seek to maintain the continuity of truth and discover new forms of revelation to draw nearer to unity with God. We seek openness and continuity across the history of the Church (liberal and catholic) and across the range of opinions in the Church (in the open forum). But the purpose is the same ultimate purpose for our life in the Church: *atonement*. Anything less would be a mental or social exercise.

With respect to the need for unity among apparent adversaries in the Church, DuBose explains in "Evangelical and Catholic" that "for Christianity as a whole, there has to be, not alone a consent 'to live and let live,' but a deeper understanding, a truer union, and a more real sense of oneness between Evangelical and Catholic. Each side needs all the true emphasis of the other for more than correction—for completion of itself."⁷ DuBose reminds us that we need more than comfortable isolation in the company of those who support our particular views. We must avoid the arrogance and narrowness of confusing *our* truth with the *whole* truth. He warns that "All the new things, all the modern *isms*, of Christianity that have life in them, as many of them have, are but broken fragments of the Truth that is One and is ever the Same."⁸ In terms of Church life today, DuBose's warning remains important, and not only for "Evangelicals" and "Catholics." I believe DuBose would say to traditionalists, feminists, and other groups in the Church today, "Your concerns are valid, but do not make the mistake of supposing that they encompass the *whole* truth. You need what other people are saying, too." DuBose urges us not to be limited or captivated by the truth of any particular "ism" in the life of the Church.

With respect to life in the Church, DuBose points us past differences and partisanship to atonement with one another and God:

God in Christ recognizes no oneness with Him that is not oneness of all in Him with one another. There is no common or universal oneness with God that does not abolish between those who share it, I will not say all differences among themselves, but at any rate all differences that deny, contradict, defeat or hinder their oneness together in Him.⁹

⁶William Porcher DuBose, *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 5.

⁷"Evangelical and Catholic," *Unity in the Faith*, 205.

⁸William Porcher DuBose, *Turning Points in My Life* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 121.

⁹"The Church," *Unity in the Faith*, 112.

DuBose is not naive about our differences in the Church. He understands that all disagreements will not be eliminated through an open forum. But he also sees those differences in terms of a larger purpose. That purpose is atonement, and DuBose calls us to transcend our differences as we allow the very differences themselves to draw us into deeper oneness with God. He explains in "The Church":

The curse of the present state of Christendom is that our differences have erected such barriers and entrenchments that intercommunion, exchange, and mutual understanding are well-nigh impossible. Let us once begin in very reality to reverse this spirit, attitude, and policy—to bring together, compare, and contribute to the common good of the One End, the End of Oneness . . . and the differences that do not eliminate themselves will be turned into the higher service of deepening, broadening, and heightening the resultant Unity.¹⁰

The unity for which DuBose calls, the unity for which he is convinced we are made, is not just an ecclesiastical unity but a unity of disciplines, backgrounds, and persuasions. This draws together tradition and fresh discovery. It draws together the showings of truth wherever realized. DuBose notes that:

There is no whole relation of correspondence and co-operation with God that is not in sympathy and unity with creation, with nature, with humanity, with all things and pre-eminently all persons. In Christ must be the ultimate unity of all these—of science, philosophy, business, politics, personal, social, national and international intercourse and relations—if He is to be unity with God. The divorce and disunity of the various parts of the truth, which is one with God, must be overcome before we can be all-one with Him: to be alien from any is to be so far alien from Him Who is All-in-all.¹¹

DuBose does not want the Church to live in an ecclesiastical ghetto, isolated from what is around it. There must be no disjunction between the Church and the world. We are called to reach out into the world to share our faith through mission and evangelism, and we must listen for God's activity and revelation in the world around us. The unity for which the Church is meant is a unity that goes beyond the Church itself, at-one-ing with God and ultimately with all that God has made. In the meantime, the unity we seek is best approached and discerned through a liberal catholic approach to theology and use of the open forum in the life of the Church.

In the open forum our extremes of thought and practice can be revealed and worked out through the dynamic process of sharing and response. Since all

¹⁰Ibid., 115

¹¹Ibid., 111.

individual perspectives are fragmentary, our understandings need to be shared for the Church's best discovery of truth. We all have something to offer and much to learn. Our understanding can grow through this interaction. We can help others see the strengths and weaknesses of their views, and others can do the same for us. We need each other. We are called to be one Church, one body, and we need to communicate with other members of the one body. Another's fragmentary and partial knowledge may be just what I need to correct or enhance my view. We should be ready to listen, to hear, and to be corrected. Nothing less than the whole Church (or as much of the whole Church as will participate) is needed for the Church's discerning the whole truth. This process is as true for a vestry as it is for a general convention. And the end of the process is atonement.

Atonement and the Process of Continuing Revelation

DuBose believes that the sanctification of the Church and the sanctification of people take place through a continuing process of revelation. This revelation may well take different forms in different situations and times. Our participation in this process is a way of life that includes openness and a willingness to be surprised by the many expressions of God's grace. As we receive, as we share actively in the process of revelation, we participate in the drawing-nearer to God that is our calling.

DuBose explains atonement as a reciprocal process involving God's activity and our own. He notes in the essay "Christ the Revelation of God" that "Any possible drawing of God to man must have its natural correlate in the drawing of man to God: there is no imparting where there is no receiving."¹² This process begins with God's initiative. DuBose states in the essay "Christian Defense" that "We can make ourselves at one with God only as God first makes himself at one with us. For himself He has done this in Christ."¹³

DuBose likewise sees the Incarnation as reciprocal: "God was not fully made Man until Man was raised up into actual oneness with God."¹⁴ The reciprocal nature of Jesus's Incarnation is also true for us and a pattern for us. The realization in us of this saving process involves a "double incarnation," a reciprocity in which we freely respond to God's offer of salvation and participate in making it ours. DuBose explains in *High Priesthood and Sacrifice* that "the Gospel of God in its entirety is not a single but a double incarnation: it is not only God's Word of Truth manifested to us objectively in the flesh of Jesus Christ; it is also God's Spirit of Life manifested in us subjectively in our own flesh, which means our own minds and hearts and lives."¹⁵

¹²"Christ the Revelation of God," *Unity in the Faith*, 141.

¹³"Christian Defense," *Unity in the Faith*, 241.

¹⁴"Incarnation," *Unity in the Faith*, 76.

¹⁵*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 161.

Proper human response to God's grace involves a subjective "incarnation." This corresponds to the objective gift of God that makes the response possible. DuBose notes in the essay "Incarnation" that "There is no such thing as ourselves in God apart from God in ourselves."¹⁶ By freely receiving the divine gift, the believer comes nearer to completion in God. This is the sanctifying process. With respect to this process of "correspondence," DuBose notes in *High Priesthood and Sacrifice* that "the subjective reaction of faith is nothing in itself or except in correspondence with the objective reality and power of grace."¹⁷ The end of this process of correspondence is our sanctification, our righteousness, our realization of the saving benefits offered objectively in Christ, our atonement with God.

Understanding the reciprocal Incarnation will help us see the importance of our ministry and participation in the atoning process. DuBose warns in "The Church" that "Our Christianity is too far off from us; we think of the Incarnation of God and the presence of Christ as too exclusively in heaven, and not sufficiently on earth and in ourselves. We do not know that in the mind and heart and will of God we are the body of Christ and the subject of the Incarnation."¹⁸ In the essay "The Demand for the Simple Gospel," DuBose emphasizes the reciprocal nature of Incarnation relative to atonement:

As God is with us only in Christ, so is Christ with us only in the earthly Body of His Church. What God wants done, what He means to do, what He is doing and will do—He is going to do in, *with, through* and *by* man. He will never do it until *we* do it in, *with, through* and *by* Him. That is what this present, or this part of, creation is for: it is for the making of *man* in, *with, through* and *by* his making himself. And he will never do that until he and God are one in the making.¹⁹

Atonement is a reciprocal process for the fulfilling of humanity in God and the fulfilling of God in humanity. That fulfillment is true now for Christ and in Christ, and it is available to us in completing the process of atonement. DuBose notes in the essay "Why the Church—in Christianity" that "God-Manhood is already a reality in Christ, and has got to be an actuality in us and in the world—if it takes eternity and all of God to make it."²⁰ DuBose explains the need for this completion and unity in "The Church":

¹⁶"Incarnation," *Unity in the Faith*, 78.

¹⁷*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 59.

¹⁸"The Church," *Unity in the Faith*, 101.

¹⁹"The Demand for the Simple Gospel," *Unity in the Faith*, 186.

²⁰"Why the Church—in Christianity," *Unity in the Faith*, 64.

The God of Christianity cannot stop short with Himself; He must be God in His world—in all the “not Himself” that proceeds from Him, and that He would fill with Himself. The Christ of Christianity cannot stop short with Himself in heaven. The Christ of our *faith* is there,—because faith must see Him in the consummation and perfection of His part in the world. The Christ of our *hope* must be there, because hope too is of the end of our human participation with Him and in Him. But the Christ of the *process*—of the *all between* us and our faith and our hope—must be infinitely and awfully in the world and in ourselves, if His part is ever to be actually accomplished.²¹

The process of our atoning with God is salvation history for humanity and each of us individually. DuBose recognizes atonement as the “making-complete” of this process with respect to all humanity and each individual. Making-one with God is the fulfillment we need. Nothing less will do. Our process of atonement is not yet complete, but already we may find ourselves nearer than we once were.

Concerning the atonement of humanity, DuBose states in the essay “A Constructive Treatment of Christianity” that the atoning process “began on earth so soon as the very first inchoate spiritual interrelation and communion were possible and actual between God and man; it will end when humanity, so far as may or shall be, shall be of one spirit, one divine law, one eternal life with God.”²² Concerning individual atonement, DuBose points to the making-complete of baptism:

I say with Luther that the beginning and end of our Christianity is to realize or make real our baptism—to be what God (not only by His Word which is Christ, but by His individual word to each of us in our baptism) has not only pronounced us but made us—parts and members of Christ. . . . [T]o make good, to realize or make real and actual, our baptism, is the sum and substance of our Christianity.²³

Our “making-complete” in God involves a process. God’s saving benefits are now present in us—implicitly. Baptism is the sacramental expression of this condition. Baptism gives outward and visible expression to our Lord’s initiative in drawing us into membership in his body. By Baptism we are members of Christ, and his salvation. But Baptism is the sacramental beginning of the process of atonement, not its fulfillment.

²¹“The Church, *Unity in the Faith*, 98.

²²“A Constructive Treatment of Christianity,” *Unity in the Faith*, 47.

²³“Why the Church—in Christianity,” *Unity in the Faith*, 60-62.

Implicit now in us are our Lord's presence, salvation, and oneness with us. But all this must become explicit in our lives. If we have received God's grace to any degree, we are closer than we once were to completion in Christ. For us as individuals and as the Church, this process of atonement is "already" begun but "not yet" completed.

God's grace for salvation is with us in this process of making the implicit to be explicit. Atonement is a process that continues by the grace of God and our active participation. As we grow and change, as we participate in God's making-us-whole, we may discover grace active in new ways. Changes of time and circumstance may likewise serve to reveal God active among us in ways we did not expect. The revelation we discover and receive is God's gift for our fulfillment in him and his fulfillment in us. As we accept God's gift, we draw nearer to being at-one with God.

Atonement and the Cross

The cross was the instrument of our Lord's sacrifice and self-offering. He accepted this blood offering of himself not as punishment but as the means for at-one-ment of his humanity and our humanity with God. That atonement is completed and perfected in Christ, and it is begun and available but not yet completed in us. All this is possible through Jesus's blood sacrifice on the cross, and it is the way of the cross that is our path for drawing nearer to atonement with God.

DuBose explains the significance of Jesus's cross and ours relative to atonement in the essay "Christian Defense":

The Cross of Christ is not a thing only; it is a will and an act. In the first instance, that is, in our Lord himself, it was the will and act which was in itself human salvation, the will and the act in which humanity *at-one'd* itself with God, *redeemed* itself from sin, *raised* itself from death. The Cross of Christ is man's perfect attitude toward sin and holiness, acted out to its perfect end or limit; the resistance unto blood, the obedience unto death, the love that lays down its life. The Cross was not for our Lord alone. It was for him only because it is the only thing for us.²⁴

The cross is not sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. The cross is for at-one-ment. The way of the cross is the way of embracing death to sin and self-centeredness so that we may find life and atonement with God. Jesus's self-offering on the cross offers us the pattern and means of our salvation. DuBose explains in the essay "Christ the Revelation of God" that

²⁴"Christian Defense," *Unity in the Faith*, 239-240.

It is only in temptation or under trial that faith is really called for or occasioned, and so is evolved or can be brought to perfection: faith is and lives and becomes all itself only through the difficulties it encounters and overcomes, the things it suffers and survives. . . . Under what other conditions could Jesus have been or become just what we worship and all that we worship in Him? In what other sense and for what other reason was He "perfected by the things He suffered," and what were the things He suffered but, to its utmost limit, the common lot of our common humanity. If human conditions were necessary to make, and make perfect, the human Jesus, they are necessary to make us.²⁵

Our cross is not a hindrance or burden. It is the instrument for our completion and making-whole. The cross is our vocation, and our means of salvation. DuBose asks, "what is the Cross but the actual process by which all that is not God dies in us, and all that is lives and grows in us?"²⁶ As we embrace the cross, as we face the sacrifices and losses of the human condition, we can be drawn nearer to atonement. DuBose urges that "God does not spare us the death that is the condition, the cost and the price of the life. His justice is the perfection of His love. It is because we are His well-beloved that it is His pleasure to subject us to the poverty that is the condition of our wealth, the death in ourselves which is necessary to, and but the obverse of, life in Him."²⁷ In the self-emptying and sacrifice of our cross, in the removing of what comes between us and the fullness of God's love, we can be at-one with God.

Atonement, the End of our Poverty

DuBose urges that "The true nature and law of things are what they are coming to, and not what they already are."²⁸ For example, we can only understand the true meaning and reality of an acorn in terms of the oak tree that it can and will become under the right conditions. If we overlook the seed's possibility and intended completion, we have not really *seen* the acorn at all. DuBose explains that "Nothing can be fully known save in the light of its *end*. To know what we are, we need to know all that we shall be."²⁹ With respect to our individual lives and the life of our Church, we need to see in terms of "what they are coming to, and not what they already are." What we are coming to, if we will, is atonement with God.

²⁵"Christ the Revelation of God," *Unity in the Faith*, 145.

²⁶*Turning Points in My Life*, 118.

²⁷"Christ the Revelation of God," *Unity in the Faith*, 153.

²⁸William Porcher DuBose, *The Reason of Life* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 66.

²⁹William Porcher DuBose, *The Soteriology of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 7.

Thus DuBose causes us to see our life in the context of the end for which we are made, and that end is atonement. He urges us to face our poverty and recognize its purpose. In *The Gospel in the Gospels*, DuBose notes, "Blessed are they who know their own insufficiency, their own poverty and weakness, sufficiently to feel their need of the powers of the world to come, of the kingdom of God in their souls."³⁰ Similarly, he notes in *Turning Points in My Life* that "Our Lord makes poverty the first condition of spiritual blessedness, because in it begins all that dependence upon God the end of which is oneness with Him. Out of that poverty come all godly sorrow, all noble meekness and humility, all hunger and thirst for rightness and fulness of life, all faith in God, all hope in self, all true self-realization and soul satisfaction."³¹

It is vital for us to see our poverty and its atoning purpose. As we recognize our poverty, we shall see that none of us has all the answers. None of us is sufficient and complete in isolation. We need to receive from beyond ourselves and our present understandings. We need to participate in a sanctifying process that will fill our emptiness and complete our wholeness. Because of our poverty, we need to be open to the truth that others offer. We need to hear each other with respect and courtesy, even when we disagree. We need to listen for consensus instead of imposing our will.

Because of our poverty, we need help from beyond ourselves. We need to be open to relationship with others and the Other. Because of our poverty, we need to share our varied perspectives in an open forum to seek the truth. We also need the crosses of life, the crosses of our mortality and imperfection, the crosses of living in an imperfect world. Our crosses serve us, because we may be tempted to "go it on our own" in life if we do not feel our poverty. As we experience our need and live our poverty, we can be open to receiving the love of God that will fill our emptiness. We can receive the making-whole in God that will heal our brokenness. In each situation of life we can discover as if for the first time the grace of God that draws us nearer to completion.

Atonement is the end of our poverty. Through our poverty we experience our incompleteness and need. As we recognize our need and receive God's grace, we continue a process whose purpose and end is atonement. Atonement is the fulfillment of all our losses and gains in life. Our poverty also *ends* in atonement, as we receive the completion and wholeness we need. Our poverty will be ended as we come to being at-one with God.

³⁰William Porcher DuBose, *The Gospel in the Gospels* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), 94.

³¹*Turning Points in My Life*, 87.

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